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COMMUNICATIONS

CASTE AND CLASS IN INDIA

Under this title, Paul Rosas (SCIENCE & SOCIETY, 1943, VII [1943], No. 2, p. 141-167) attempts to give a description and an explanation of the extraordinary social phenomenon that passes under the name of caste in India. Both "facts" and interpretation are open to objection, so that a few remarks upon them may be of use for clarification.

Almost every statement of a general nature made by anyone about Indian castes may be contradicted. The Brahmins are not to eat meat nor any food derived from the taking of life But Vedis Brahmins ate beef, Kashmiri Brahmins do eat meat, those in Bengal fish, without losing caste. The Sarasvats in Goa eat fish regularly and venison on occasion, but touching an egg or a chicken would be an incredible performance for any of them. Again, the *sudra,* lowest of all castes, has no access to temples or to book learning under the traditional system. We may ignore the developing and semi-anglicized city schools here, but even in otherwise very conservative villages, I have seen *sudra* teachers instructing Brahmin boys in book-learning; in the most surprising case, the teacher was autodidact, and taught even Sanskrit, the traditional sacred language preserved only for the upper castes, to sons of Brahmins, and in the precincts of the temple. Caste is supposed to exist only for the Hindus, but here class phenomena cut across the religious barrier. There are good Roman Catholics in Goa who regard themselves as *Brahmin* Christians, and remember their family before forcible conversion some four centuries ago; they will prefer to take drinking water or food from a Hindu Brahmin, but not from a *"sudra* Christian." The point here is that these Brahmin Christians and the Hindu Brahmins with whom they deal on such curious terms are both members of the land-owning class by long and conservative tradition.

Seeing the great diversity of features, it will be necessary to take a large view of the caste institution as such. But the view that Rosas gives, identifying the four-caste division with a class division and the general castes with tribal divisions is nevertheless too large, obliterates too many details to be useful. There are and always have been princelings, even kings, who belonged to castes other than the *ksatriya,* which

should traditionally be the warrior or the ruling caste. The fact is, however, that any ruler or even an invader (like the Scythian Rajputs) who will extend his patronage to the Brahmins and give at least nominal adherence to the tenets of some kind of Hinduism will be given the honors of a *ksatriya,* though his poor relatives in some distant village may be shepherds without much status. The inclusion of tribal and traditional organizations within the fold of caste gives the institution its power in social organization and is a development of the original four-caste system to fit newer conditions. Finally, it is not necessarily true that caste will disappear with modern means of production any more than the feudal ideology disappeared from Japanese society with modern machinery. Caste has already exercised, in India, the function of medieval trade-guilds, in that the leather workers, some kinds of tailors, masons, etc., form in most Hindu localities, distinct castes by themselves. Communal differences are already proving very convenient in matters of factory management. Where the unions are troublesome, the usual custom on the part of the clever factory owner is to recruit people of as many different religions and castes as possible, to prevent their union. With increasing production, this has become a force tending to wipe out caste. But if the productive forces cannot find an outlet, caste could be made an excuse for economic victimization, as with the Jews in Germany. Some such thing has already happened with the untouchable in the extreme south. Not only that, we can discern the economic driving force behind most of the great theological upheavals in India. Within the framework of caste and of Hinduism, one has only to see the bitter quarrels between the *smarta* and *vaisnava* Brahmins, most of whom cannot explain the extraordinarily subtle philosophic differences between the teachings of their founders, but when one sect displaced another, one has only to look a little closer into such historical records as are available, and it will usually be clear that there was also a change in the ownership of the land.

In fact, this brings us to the main objection to Rosas's treatment of the subject: the total absence of all historical perspective. There is a very profound reason for this lack, because *the caste system is designed to preserve Indian society in a static mold.* Its principle function *now* is the *negation of history,* and therewith the negation of progress. For example, over large parts of the country, and side by side with very ancient observances is the festival of *satyanarayana,* the "true Narayana." As far as can be ascertained, this has absolutely no sanction in scripture, being adopted from the mid-nineteenth century cult of a Mohammedan *pir* called Satya. But if necessary, someone, a needy Brahmin of some sort, would have arisen to write a whole book on the subject, giving the

necessary sanction. It is as if a book had been written into the Bible enjoining the worship of Allah, but to the true Brahmanical mind, there is nothing out of the way in such a performance, combined with all the ritual of an exaggerated conservatism. This also is a feature of the system. The Hinduism we have today is not of the Hinduism of the Vedas, nor of the original Aryans whoever they were. The modern Hinduism, and therewith the modern caste, have not only survived in inroads of Islam and of Christianity (from the days of St. Thomas and Nestorius) but are themselves entirely transformed by a religion that prevailed almost universally in India for centuries, that is, Buddhism.

The rise of Buddhism has a date and a locality: Magadha (modern Bihar) in the sixth century B.C. A great deal is said about the new philosophy; Buddhist non-killing or non-violence, *ahimsa,* is now an integral part of Hinduism, and has been sharpened to a political tool on a class as well as a nationalistic basis by Mahatma Gandhi. It was originally borrowed from Jainism, a much older religion. The questions that no one troubles to answer are: why did Buddhism start where it did? Why did it spread so rapidly? And why did it die out? The reasons, naturally, are not to be found in the philosophy of the day but in the productive relations, in the historical tendencies of the period. Buddhism spread far beyond Indian frontiers, to China, Japan, Asia-minor. It is the ruling force of reaction in Tibet and even Mongolia to this day Rosas, however, fails to consider why Buddhism managed to cross the geographical isolation of India whereas the caste system, according to him, was effectively prevented by those same barriers from spreading outside the country.

Caste in the days of the Buddha was, probably, quite near to the class system that Rosas ascribes to the *jati.* But its stronghold was nearer the Indus valley than to Magadha, and it was extremely rigid and conservative. It was bound inseparably to the old trade channel to the west, through Iran, along the route explored by Stein and followed by Alexander's army. This system did not allow for expansion, and it did not permit unification. On the contrary, it opposed unity in the political and economic sense. The Brahmin, always the kingpin of the caste system, was then purely the *sacrificial* priest, and his main source of livelihood seems to have been the fee at the sacrifice. The purpose of the sacrifice was propitiation of the gods, and naturally, the grandest sacrificial ceremonies would be for success in war. The priests gained a great deal from the constant warfare of petty princelings in the days of Buddha. That at least is the picture we get from the stories associated with the oldest Buddhistic canonical literature. As there was no pay-

ment to the farmer for the sacrificial animals, and as robbers grew in number between populated cities, both the peasant and the trader suffered. There must have been pre-Buddhistic protest, for which Jainism was too passive because of its extreme form of *ahimsa* to be of general use. We can trace other forms from the literary tradition that called Magadhan Brahmins *brahmabandhu,* a term of contempt. Buddhist *ahimsa* is practical, directed not against meat-eating as such but against the costly royal sacrifices. Buddhism did not touch the older ritual, nor set up a new one of its own, it worked out a new social scheme which would make people more civilized, make it possible for them to coexist with less friction. Problems such as the existence of a soul were simply and deliberately left aside as of no moment. Nevertheless, this system spread not because of its greater attractiveness, but because it gave the necessary impetus to (or was the expression of) the craving for a strong, centralized monarchy that would stop the constant, petty warfare and make trade routes safe. The person who took the first step in this direction was not Buddha's royal pupil Bimbisara, but his parricide son Ajatasattu. One of his most difficult victories was the elimination of an oligarchic democracy not far removed from parallel contemporary states in Greece, namely the tribal government of the Licchavis or Vajjis. This was highly praised by the Buddha for the humanity and goodness of their institutions, and it retained a traditional glory for a thousand years, so that the first Gupta king was proud to claim a "Licchavi princess" has his mother, while forgetting to mention his father in the inscriptions So, Buddhism is not altogether the victory of good over evil that it has usually been considered to be. It is remarkable that it is a *proselyting* religion as Hinduism was not, and that the principal function of its monks was originally to spread the doctrine. We hear of monks, even in the time of the Buddha, going half way down the peninsula, and not towards the Indus, though the religion as such had not spread beyond the Gangetic basin at the time of his death, and the total number of monks could not have been more than five hundred. Reading the older *Pali* Buddhist canon, one is struck by the fact that though the Buddha was from an old and proud, though somewhat decayed *Ksatriya* family, his most ardent lay followers seem to have been merchants, traders, men of wealth—a class that is absolutely silent in Indian history as we have received it from records and inscriptions. Now, was it purely a negligible accident that Buddhism spreads with the Mauryan empire, without becoming its official religion till the empire is consolidated by the last conquest of Asoka? Was it also a coincidence that though a culture rich in natural wealth is known in the peninsula proper in supposed "prehistoric" times, the first coins found there (with the possible ex-

ception of a few harbors on the western coast) are certainly Mauryan? The first armies to overrun south India, as far as the modern state of Mysore, were those of Asoka's grandfather Sandragupta, who was not a Buddhist, but is supposed to have died in the other non-violent religion, Jainism. That is, Buddhist non-violence did not interfere with great wars in India, any more than it did with those of the Buddhist Jenghis Khan, but it did help stop the petty ones, and it was, in a way the older caste system could not have been, an influence making for unity. Still more important, it opened up the Indian peninsula, till then a *terra incognita.*

If so, why did caste come back in a changed form? Partly because of the ritual, which was exclusively the possession of Brahmins. Partly because the salient features of Buddhism had been absorbed by Brahminism, which went so far as to admit Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu. But mainly because it was uneconomic, because its historical usefulness was exhausted in India, though not in the other countries to which it had spread. That is, the larger monasteries held too much land, which was appropriated by kings like Sasanka under the Brahminical reformation. The Buddhist monk had no longer to beg for his livelihood or to preach to the people, who had all been converted; the one who ministered to the spiritual needs of the people was now the village priest, always a Brahmin, who might not know much philosophy, but who could as always officiate at all ceremonies, bless the crops, and so combine the functions of priest and medicine-man in general. After the Mauryan conquest, local influence became strong again, separate provincial kingdoms again coming into existence and fighting for power, though on a very much larger scale than in Magadha of the sixth century B.C. So, the Brahmanical methods have again their needs, kings again celebrate huge sacrifices for victory in battle, though these do not cause the loss they used to as the number of kings, or at least their density is less. And foreign invasions are no longer resisted with the opposition that stopped Alexander, and defeated Seleucus. Nevertheless, what resistance there is comes from those following the Brahmanical and not the Buddhistic philosophy. The monk could afford to stay in his monastery and ignore the fighting, whereas the Brahmin had a family, and in general closer ties with the people.

We can get a rather faint glimpse of the four-caste system in its most remote (pre-Buddhistic) origins, and it is, as far as can be seen, pre-Aryan, probably associated with the ancient civilization of Mohenjo Daro and the Indus valley, and with destruction in or about the second millemmium B.C. by the Aryans. It may reasonably be conjectured that the conquering warriors swept a civilization which had accurate weights

and good cities, but no weapons to speak of. After years, probably centuries, of a fearfully hungry existence in the forests, one clan of the conquered becomes the priest-caste of the conquerors: the Bhargava Brahmins. The conquerors become the *ksatriya* caste, being warriors. The traders are present from older times, and the rest of the population sinks to a regularized slavery but without large-scale trading in human beings as in the west, being the *sudra* caste. The prohibition against a *sudra* learning the trade of weapons and against his education in the Sanskrit language, therefore, is a precautionary or a police measure against helots. This system, crude as it sounds, was still a powerful advance over what existed before: helpless cities and almost savage barbarians who sacked them. It is this system that enabled other regions to be opened up, that allowed a more vigorous if less decorative civilization to advance into the interior of India. Its flexibility, its post-Buddhistic development into a method for maintaining the status of any rule that made nominal concessions to Hinduism, enabled it to survive great changes. These changes, it did its best to deny altogether by absorption (when compelled to absorb the changes) and by promotion to an indefinite antiquity. After the vedas, it is very difficult to find any Indian text that is generally known and is nevertheless fixed with certainty. This "fluidity" that torments any scholar who looks into Indian manuscripts is a social feature of the country. The change-over from Buddhism also laid the foundations of later communal and religious quarrels in some provinces. The Muslims in Bengal for example, are mostly converted from the Buddhist peasants, who were the poorest and the most oppressed class for centuries.

With the development of the country as a whole, and the foundation of its economy on the village unit with the family as a sub-unit, the progressive function of caste may be said to have ended, so that caste itself must thereafter attempt to be static. But the fundamental need of the country, food, could not be regularly satisfied by a static system. As no real productive changes occurred until the advent of European "civilization," (though *usines* without machine power had developed by the seventeenth century), which followed the Buddhistic pattern in sending its missionaries, traders, ad armies, the sole method of amelioration was to dull the pain of living. Thus it is that so much of Indian philosophy and literature, which went on developing, had to follow the religious path. This "opium of the people" was needed if life were to be worth living. Even today, the Indian peasant woman, who has to work in the fields and cannot tend the infant she has borne, drugs it with ordinary opium to prevent its crying from illness or hunger. Without thinking of the consequences of their action, our philosophers fol-

lowed this pattern, which will have to be discarded when the productive system of the country reaches a stage of maturity.

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NOTES ON LITERARY TRENDS UNDER HITLER

I. FURTHER COMMENTS ON CONTEMPORARY NAZI WRITERS

In his recent article on "Literary Trends Under Hitler" (SCIENCE & SOCIETY for Spring, 1944), Dr. Lyman R. Bradley has performed a valuable service to students and critics of literature. He has presented the subject of National Socialist writing—I am myself averse to calling it literature—in the light of German literary history. Such a systematic and definitive analysis was long overdue. It should serve to reveal to us certain stigmata, indicative of pre-fascist, undemocratic tendencies in any national literature. Out of my own experience as a reader of German books for a publishing house, I am able to supplement Dr. Bradley's remarks. My observations on the subject were presented in an informal report for a round-table discussion of the League of American Writers in 1936. Since then, from time to time, I have added further notes and comments, but the chief categories were already apparent by that time. The material fell into three main groups: (1) those works seeking to give direct expression to a "steely romanticism," or what may be termed the Hitler spirit in general; (2) those expressing various special phases of the Hitler "ideology" such as the myth of *das Volk,* the Nazi attitudes toward the church, the agrarian question, the family, etc., often thinly veiled (under this head would come rewritings of German history and of the history of other nations); (3) those works representing one form or another of escape from social-economic-political thinking, including stories, plays and poems glorifying the rustic or the primitive life, tales of adventure in foreign lands, literary importations through the medium of translations, and the like.

Before discussing the first group, it may be well to see just what that "steely romanticism" of Dr. Goebbels is supposed to be. He himself has stated it as follows: "German art of the next decade is to be heroic; it is to be steely and romantic, objective and free of sentimentality, deeply national in feeling . . . ; it is to be this, or it is to be nothing." Commenting on this statement in his address before the All-Union Con-